

Article

For the Common Good: The Symbiosis between Individual and Community in the Philosophy of Xunzi

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Abstract: The concept of community within Confucianism is deeply rooted in its unique understanding of individuals. This is exemplified by Xunzi, who claims that individuals, driven by their growing desires for satisfaction, would fight over limited resources and hence lead themselves to social disorder and distress. Thus, he evaluates human nature to be evil, thereby highlighting the necessity of forming a community. Keeping in view Xunzi's aims of establishing a harmonious co-existence amongst individuals who "desire or hate the same things" (*yuwu tongwu* 欲恶同物), this paper explores his considerations and justifications when accessing the individual and the community. Firstly, the origins of community arise from the survival crises of individuals in the state of nature. As individuals face the dilemma of disorder, they opt to form a community. This would, to a certain extent, endow individuals with rationality and the capacity to suppress their desires, therefore differentiating them from animals. Secondly, the principle of *fen* 分 (social division) is important in maintaining social order and uniting individuals under the governance of the *jun* 君 (lord). Differentiated justice embodied in the concept of *fen* also presents a contrast from the universal implications of *qun* 群 (community). Following social distinctions and affiliations, people are then absorbed into the ritual structure and social relationships as embedded individuals. Thirdly, realizing the common good would depend on the moral transformation of individuals and their identification with values that define an ideal community on a spiritual level, ultimately reflecting the essence of ancient Chinese universalism.



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1. Introduction

As is evident from the lack of conscious development of the concept of the individual during the western Zhou dynasty, the origins of ancient Chinese culture paid little attention to the individual as a smaller unit within the collective community. This mindset shifted with the decline of *li* 礼 (ritual) and *yue* 乐 (ceremonial music) during the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, prompting pre-Qin scholars to examine individuals in the context of the social order in which everyone survived and thrived.

Amongst scholars of his time, Xunzi stood out for his proposal on the construction of a new social order grounded in the state of nature. Combined with his understanding of the shortcomings of human nature, he argues for the necessity of community formation by providing a profound dissection of common human emotions. His famous proposition that “man’s nature is evil” (*Xing’e* 性恶) embodies a thorough understanding of human desires in uncivilized cases. An important point to note would be that Xunzi did not strictly distinguish between the concepts of *xing* 性 (nature), *qing* 情 (emotion), and *yu* 欲 (desire), in which sense this paper agrees that Xunzi’s views on human nature are not entirely pessimistic (see Xu 1969, p. 234).¹ However, it is evident that Xunzi specifically calls for mankind to overcome the selfish and evil nature of their character, for fear of detrimental effects to the overall development of society. Moral education is hence essential in

instilling common acceptance of a standard for “good”, or what may be called “the common good”, in order to meet the needs of the community. Contrarily, Xunzi also warns that if individuals fail to restrain the desires rooted in their nature, allowing their desires to expand endlessly will lead to the proliferation of “evil”. Consequently, he concludes that man cannot live without a community.² Indeed, an individual’s force is extremely tiny in Nature, requiring communal stability and order for better existence. This is the starting point of Xunzi’s political philosophy.

Since one’s development would always be entangled with that of the community, one must deal with relationships between oneself and others. This is not only a sociological issue concerning public and private spheres, but also an anthropological problem concerning the integration of individuals into diverse and heterogeneous societies. Unlike Mencius’ belief in sprouts of *shan* 善 (goodness) present in human nature, Xunzi, as a realist philosopher, took into consideration the practical circumstances of the limited nature of material resources, which would affect individual existence and hence shape external norms when cultivating *shan*.³ Paradoxically, uneducated man’s desires are unlimited and can never be satisfied. This inevitably leads to some degree of tension between an individual and his Other, as it seems impossible to inculcate in him the virtue of self-sacrifice and accomplishment for others. This is similar to Thomas Hobbes’ illustration that “every man is enemy to every man” in the state of nature, and that the basic principle of “self-preservation” in human nature gives rise to the desire for “power” to secure survival. (See Sabine 1986, pp. 522–25) Xunzi’s view differs slightly, in that he acknowledged the role of Confucianism in educating mankind to overcome the “evil” in human nature, to adopt a better way of life, and to take up one’s moral obligations through the cognition of the *dao* and the observance of rituals throughout an individual’s entire life. This would prompt individuals to cooperate with others to achieve the common good. Focusing on the differences and commonalities between the virtue politics of Mencius and Xunzi, Sungmoon Kim points out that: “Although starting from a radically different view of human nature, Xunzi joins Mencius on Confucianism’s common positive moral-political perfectionist ambition. It was their shared conviction that positive Confucianism can be attained not by suppressing the desire for material interests but by transforming it into the public interest that is profitable for both the ruler and the ruled” (Kim 2020, p. 57). Therefore, it can be seen that individuals, according to Xunzi, are not only participants with multiple roles across political, social, and ethical life but also moral subjects seeking the common good.

Xunzi’s core concept depicting the relationship between the community and the individual is *qun*, but there are many different interpretations of this term used in Xunzi. Eric Hutton translates the word *qun* as “community”, while Eirik Lang Harris notes that these terms are used both as nouns and verbs, and he renders “*qun*” as “community” or “to form community” depending on how it is used in the sentence (Harris 2016, p. 96). In contrast to the above translations, Fu Yan 严复 (1854–1921), a well-known modern Chinese interpreter, considered Xunzi’s usage of *qun* to be equivalent to “society” in Herbert Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* (*Qunxue Siyan* 群学肆言). In the Chinese context, *qun* holds the meaning of society or social groups. In addition, Fu Yan translated John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* as *Qunji Quanjie Lun* 群己权界论 (which can be understood as “the Boundary of Community-Power and Self-Rights”) in view of the idea that the theme concerns civil and “social liberty” (*qunli zhi ziyou* 群理之自繇) (Yan 1981, p. 3) and that the boundary dividing the powers of community and the individual must hence be drawn to ensure its people can achieve true social freedom.

Generally, *qun* has been understood as “social group” in sociology, and “community” in politics. The question then points to what exactly does *qun* encompass as a philosophical terminology? This paper suggests that Xunzi’s concept of *qun* is proposed under the broad worldview of “all under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), which encapsulates “all creatures” (*wanwu* 万物). Therefore, he brings across the point that all life can find its place within the community and be guided toward the best available paths of development. The focal point of Xunzi’s thought is hence that man’s virtue can be cultivated through the cogni-

tion of *dao* and the observance of rituals, honing their abilities in taking on different social roles to support the orderly development of society. This process is, however, seen to be possible exclusively when the establishment of rituals and legislation are conducted by a sage. The individual which Xunzi is concerned about is never an isolated being, but one that has always existed within social networks. This includes their relationship with sage kings (*shengwang* 圣王), whom would delegate suitable roles to his people to collectively complete work and practice rituals in order to achieve the common good.

Reviewing previous studies, it is found that many scholars have focused on the concept of *qun* in Xunzi but have paid insufficient attention to the individual. This paper attempts to offer an affirmative defense that the idea of the individual has already been present and would lay important foundations in explaining the formation of the community as explained in Xunzi. Firstly, this paper discusses the role of the individual in the origins and formation of the community and justifies why the concept of person is understood as an embedded individual. Secondly, concerning the problem of how to *qun* (form a community), this paper explains Xunzi's understanding of the political principle of *fen*. Thirdly, this paper explores the moral transformation of the individual and the establishment of an ideal community. Finally, this paper also suggests the implications of Xunzi's views on the individual and the community for contemporary society.

2. The Origin of Community: Individual Co-Existence Scenarios

It is a highly debated topic as to when the concept of “individual” emerged in Chinese culture, and whether it corresponds with individualism in Western philosophy. In discussions of comparative ethics, some scholars, including Kwong-loi Shun, have pointed out that certain Western notions have been claimed to be inapplicable to the Confucian concept of personhood (Shun 2004, p. 183). Nonetheless, the spirit of humanism was abundant in Confucianism in the pre-Qin period, the pursuits of people from the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods gradually veered from the worship of heaven and superstition of gods that had been prevalent in primitive society, to the seeking of a realistic significance of human existence. However, perceptions of human existence at that time varied from Western notions of atomic individualism as individuals were still largely integrated into a complex system of rituals and relationships in the traditional Confucian society. Therefore, this paper examines Xunzi's concept of the person as an “embedded individual” (see Dongfang 2010, p. 127), closely linked to others on various levels.⁴ To illustrate this argument, this paper explores Xunzi's statements from different dimensions.

2.1. Concerns about Individuals

When discussing the concept of the individual, a logical starting point would be Xunzi's statements about human characteristics. As a realist thinker, Xunzi depicts humans as being in the original state of individuals. This corresponds with the theoretical “state of nature”, a hypothetical initial phase of human society, which is able to provide the necessary justifications for the existence of community while at the same time also providing a rational basis for specific claims for political action. Specifically, in Xunzi's view, human beings driven by primitive desires are always unsatisfied. Consider the following quotations:

The natural disposition of people is that for food they want meats, for clothes they want embroidered garments, for travel they want chariots and horses, and moreover they want the riches of surplus wealth and accumulated goods. Even if provided these things, to the end of their years they would never be satisfied; this is also the natural disposition of people. (“Rongru 荣辱”) (Hutton 2014, p. 29)

Liking what is beneficial and desiring gain are people's inborn dispositions and nature. Suppose there were brothers who had some property to divide, and that they followed the fondness for benefit and desire for gain in their inborn dispositions and nature. If they were to do so, then the brothers would conflict and contend with each other for it. However, let them be transformed by the proper

form and order contained in ritual and *yi*. If so, then they would even give it over to their countrymen. (“Xing’e”) (Hutton 2014, p. 251)

Taking into account his experience, Xunzi points out that human beings are inherently selfish and unsatisfied, and are driven by primitive desires, leading to paradoxes since each individual would seek to maximize their personal satisfactions albeit in a society with limited resources. It is therefore within the selfish nature of man to desire benefits, even going to the extreme extents of trying every possible way to obtain them, regardless of whether this means having to compete with brothers or other blood relatives over materialistic possessions. This tension between individuals in turn makes it difficult to foster mutual trust, as it is seemingly impossible to cultivate the virtue of sacrificing oneself to help others. Exploring deeper, the fundamental problem here lies in the way that, as it is difficult for mankind to overcome the unlimited desires inherent to human nature, an adverse practical impact would be the inability of people to achieve rational distributions of resources when faced with competition and struggle. For Xunzi, this problem can only be resolved if people are made to form a community in which a stable order has been set; for individuals, integration would mean that one’s evil nature has to be suppressed or transformed by observing ritual, and subsequently cultivating moral sentiments.

To solve the dilemma of human society, Xunzi provides a thorough account of the process by which ritual was established by the former kings (*xianwang* 先王):

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose. (“Lilun 礼论”) (Hutton 2014, p. 201)

Explaining the cause of ritual, Xunzi believes that it is crucial in regulating human emotions and desires and enabling individuals to be liberated from their state of nature where their desires are limitless. In view of this, Philip J. Ivanhoe argues that Xunzi seeks to achieve a “happy symmetry” between desires and goods (Ivanhoe 2014, pp. 43–60). Chenyang Li 李晨阳 also elaborates on the correlation between desires and goods, pointing out that Xunzi explicitly drew connections between rituals and desires, proposing that, on the precondition that rituals inculcate the effective restraint of one’s desires, growth of desire itself can facilitate the production of goods, in such a way that existing supplies should be able to satisfy suppressed desires and demands. (Li 2021, vol. 10, pp. 101–7) In this way, human beings solve the problem of mutual strife in primitive societies through the formulation and use of rituals. Loubna El Amine emphasizes the importance of rituals from a different perspective, claiming that: “Rituals, by clarifying positions and social distinctions, contribute to the avoidance of conflict in society” (Amine 2015, p. 99). As evident from the above-mentioned, perceptions of the state of human nature serves as the logical starting point in explaining the construction of *qun* in Xunzi. Concurrently, practicing rituals would be the only approach that allows the group to avoid descending into chaos.

It is noteworthy that Xunzi’s envisioned process of establishing a community does not involve the signing of contracts or the formation of a general will, but rather the formulation of rituals as an essential part of the process. He argues that “people of evil nature” can be transformed morally under the influence of rituals, thus leading the society towards better progress. However, Xunzi has also omitted some key questions from his argument. For instance, why would people be willing to change their nature to accept the rule of the sages? Does a community ensure that the needs of all its people are met? No direct answers have been given. In Western classical political philosophy, scholars such

as Thomas Hobbes, Hugo Grotius, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau illustrated the social contract as a foundation for attaining the common good. For example, Rousseau assumes, “Men have reached a point at which the obstacles that endanger their preservation in the state of nature overcome, by their resistance, the forces which each individual can exert with a view to maintaining himself in that state. Then this primitive condition can no longer subsist, and the human race would perish unless it changed its mode of existence.” This situation then renders a social contract by which the community is restructured and supported (Rousseau 2010, p. 14). The social contract was hence thought to reflect the general will of individuals, as seen from how he wrote that, “The general will alone can direct the forces of the state according to the object of its institution, which is the common good” (Rousseau 2010, p. 25). There are differences and commonalities between these discourses and Xunzi’s thoughts, the commonality being that both camps acknowledge that the public good would be a long-term benefit of the individual. On the other hand, their differences lie in the varying methods and imaginations of what the common good would be. While Xunzi believes that “human nature is evil,” he also admits that human nature can be transformed, during which the rites created by sages served as stimuli for transformation. In this regard, Xunzi emphasizes that “the fate of a person rests in Heaven, and the fate of a state rests in ritual” (“Qiangguo 强国”) (Hutton 2014, p. 163). To clarify Xunzi’s theories, the fate of the nation would be determined by rituals performed by the sages. Observation of such rituals allows for good governance to be achieved. However, the destiny of individuals would still be mainly determined by Heaven and cannot be changed. This highlights the social significance of rituals, which enables people to form a community not bound by blood, but by common values, norms, conventions, etc.

2.2. Distinctions between Qun and Animal Groups

Observing the formation of the community, it was the sage who first put in place various regulations, which through rituals, sought to shape the social essence of every individual, eventually transforming them completely from “natural persons” to “embedded individuals”. At the same time, as defined by various social rules and moral codes, a sharp distinction is made between human beings and animals who lived naturally in groups. Xunzi describes the difference between man and animals in the following way: that the essence of human beings lies in our abilities to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, therefore being able to set up reasonable social norms and order under the provisions of ritual to form communities. He writes:

Water and fire have *qi* 气 (vital breath) but are without life. Grass and trees have life but are without awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness but are without *yi* 义 (a sense of morality and justice). Humans have *qi* and life and awareness, and moreover they have *yi*. And so they are the most precious things under Heaven. They are not as strong as oxen or as fast as horses, but oxen and horses are used by them. How is this so? I say it is because humans are able to form communities while the animals are not. (“Wangzhi 王制”) (Xunzi 9.16a, Knoblock 1990, vol. II, pp. 103–4; Hutton 2014, p. 76)

According to Xunzi, humans occupy a distinguished position in the world, and their wisdom is superior to that of animals, allowing them to make other species work for them. This is due to the fact that only humans have the capacity to “*qun*” (form a community). However, Xunzi also acknowledges that “Wherever grasses and trees grow together, birds and beasts will flock. This is because each thing follows its own class” (“*Qunxue* 劝学”) (Hutton 2014, p. 3). Although also referred to as “*qun*” in Xunzi’s description, grasses, trees, and animals form their own “group” only because they each belong to their own species, and similar species naturally tend to grow together. However, Derk Bodde suggests that many animals, such as bees, in fact choose to live in a *qun*, and that even within these animal groups, specific divisions of labor and hierarchies exist (Bodde 1991, p. 311).⁵ This has spurred further discussions about the differences between human and animal behavioral patterns, as well as methods of social interactions. Xunzi’s assertion that only

“humans are able to *qun*” has led some scholars to question the meaning of *qun* and the way in which *qun* is discussed. Eirik Lang Harris focuses on this issue and proposes that it could be the case that Xunzi used the term “community” in two slightly different ways, one of which would be purely descriptive, while the other could have normative overtones (Harris 2016, pp. 101–2). If discussions of animal organizations are regarded as descriptive, Xunzi’s proposition that “humans are able to form communities” is normative, which highlights humankind’s capability to engage in reason. As Robert Brandom points out, “Reason is as nothing to the beasts of the field. We are the ones on whom reasons are binding, who are subject to the peculiar force of the better reason. This force is a species of normative force, a rational ‘ought’” (Brandom 1994, p. 5). Equipped with reason, men can actively make choices that best serves their long-term development. Antonio S. Cua also suggests that there appears to be two different conceptions of men in Xunzi’s thought. On one hand, man is to be understood in terms of his basic motivational structure. In this sense, men are alike in being actuated with the same range of feelings and desires. In another understanding, man is to be characterized in terms of his capacity to make moral distinctions. This differentiates men from animals (Cua 2005, p. 12). We can take a moral description of men instead of a normative one.

In order to evaluate the significance of Xunzi’s terms of *qun*, it is necessary to understand the development and evolution of the traditional Chinese character *qun* 羣, on top of considering the differences between human and animal behavior. In his study of *Jiaguwen* 甲骨文 (scriptures carved on tortoise shells or animal bones during Shang and Western Zhou periods) and the Jin inscriptions for the character *qun*, Shi Feng 冯时 analyzes the interpretations of *qun* in pre-Xunzi periods from the perspectives of the original meaning of the character *qun*, the changes and developments of its meaning, the distinction between humans and animals advocated by the ancient Chinese, and the reference to related terms. In particular, he mentions that the ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* 说文解字 (Origin of Chinese Characters) explains explicitly that the character for *qun* was created in relation to the observations of sheep while its pronunciation was similar to the word for *jun*. It can hence be seen that the character *qun* is derived from the habit of sheep to gather in flocks (Feng 2019, vol. 2, pp. 39–41). Clearly, the ancient Chinese thinkers were already aware of the fact that animals also live in herds or groups, which is also termed as *qun* in the *Xunzi*. While the character of sheep is still utilized as a symbol to denote *qun*, it is evident that the idea of human community inherits its ancient meaning of “a flock of sheep”. However, it is also clear that there is also the idea of a more prominent lord present in the human *qun*. Given this context and consideration, the use of sheep or lambs as a symbol is in fact a way of expressing that people are as humble as lambs.

According to the study of etymology, a social order set up within the human community is headed by a lord, under whom all others are subordinates, this is an integral characteristic of the formation of *qun*. A debatable question is where the boundaries and distinctions between human communities and animal groups lie. From a biological perspective, it is clear that *qun* is not exclusive to humans as a survival option, because animal groups can also have leaders. For example, in the case of honeybees, there is also a “lord” who calls the shots. However, Xunzi’s understanding of *qun* emphasizes the unique human capacity for rationality, which creates a normative force that does not exist in animal groups. The question then arises as to how Xunzi’s so-called *qun* should be understood and how it differs from the animal group or herd. I offer two possible defenses as follows.

Firstly, one key difference between the social existence of humans and animals is the capacity for moral and value-driven identification that Xunzi highlights as the foundation of human cohesion. Human beings possess a rational and orderly capacity to overcome primitive desires, and this is the key to being “the most noble of all”. Through the universal recognition of the common good, individuals no longer perceive their place in the natural world as an isolated entity but would place themselves under a social ideology or value system, thereby finding their own position and responsibility which enables them to further realize the particular meaning of their existence within the community. However,

this understanding does not cater for when *qun* is understood as groups with a division of labor but without shared ethical values. Humans were seen to be the only species who will seek to survive as a community under the dominance of ritual, ethics and morality. Confucianism recognizes this as the greatest difference between humans and animals. Many contrast Mencius' theory of the goodness of human nature, which distinguishes between "humans" (who are supposed to be moral) and "non-humans" (who are incapable of compassion), by the four sprouts (四端 *sidian*), with Xunzi's belief that every human must acquire these goods to be human. From Xunzi's perspective, although man is not born with a tendency to be good, man can become good as long as he is able to accept transformations imposed by ritual, morality and law, and this constitutes the greatest difference between man and animals. As Feng's study points out, the *qun* evolved from a group of animals from the same species to a group of people, expanding from a group of blood relatives to a social relationship that broke through the barriers of blood relations, eventually taking on the meaning of society (Feng 2019, vol. 2, p. 44). The *qun* referred to by Xunzi is in fact equivalent to the whole of a ritually governed society. Xunzi's concept of categories (*lei* 类) describes the sage as an individual with the ability to comprehend and unify categories. A wise ruler is able to "thoroughly grasp the unifying categories of things" (*zhitongtonglei* 知通统类) ("Ruxiao 儒效") (Hutton 2014, p. 67). The ancient Chinese annotator Yang Jing 杨倞 elucidates that "all the rules and regulations are made into a system of laws" (Wang 1988, p. 248). As can be seen, grasping the unifying categories of things has the effect of defining norms and establishing legal patterns in different ways. Thus, in addition to the natural attributes of man, the social attributes of man are also regarded as a specific category by Xunzi.

Second, it is obvious that trees and animals also have groups which they belong to, but these groups, which are categorized primarily by species, lack considerations and acceptance of diversity. Although creatures might belong to different categories, an important aspect of Xunzi's notion of *qun* lies in the basis of respect for the differences between all creatures. Therefore, he emphasizes the idea of a "clear division to form the community" (*mingfenshiqun* 明分使群) ("Fuguo 富国"). Consider the following statements:

The myriad things share the same cosmos and have different bodies. They have no intrinsic fittingness but are useful for humans. This is simply the arrangement of the world. Various grades of people live together. They share the same pursuits but have different ways. They share the same desires but have different understandings. This is simply the way they are born . . . People all desire the same things and all hate the same things. But while their desires are many, the things to satisfy them are few, and since they are few, people are sure to struggle over them. Thus, the products of the hundred crafts are means to nurture a person, but even the most capable can not engage in every craft, nor can people each fill every professional post. ("Fuguo") (Hutton 2014, p. 83)

Continuing his analysis on the inequality of demand and supply, as well as desire and satisfaction, Xunzi noted that individuals all love or hate the same things, and hence create a mismatch between their constant desire for more benefits and the limited social supply. The struggle to attain more resources hence ensues, thus resulting in a situation where each person's life needs to be supported by a variety of productions. However, it is impossible for one to be competent in all professions or to manage all work at the same time. Therefore, one cannot live apart from the community, should they want to survive. Additionally, if the individual lives in a community where different positions and statuses are not reasonably divided, strife will arise. As such, nothing is better than to have clear distinctions between ranks and classes in order to save one's life from trouble and eliminate calamity.

From the point of view of nature, although all animals and plants live in the same world, they take on different forms. The same applies to human beings. Although they share some common desires and pursuits, their method of attaining benefits might also differ, therefore differences also exist within commonalities. In order to avoid chaos amongst

the masses, Xunzi argues that it would be best to clarify the distinctions of rank and hierarchy. That being said, the sage must also adhere to the principles relating to co-existence of differences as well as universality, taking into account people's common feelings and desires, and subsequently granting them different degrees of satisfaction according to their abilities, social status, divisions, and relationships, rather than practicing absolute egalitarianism. From the above discussion, it is easy to ascertain that Xunzi does have his solutions for constructing pluralistic groups when dealing with universality and differences of the population, which is precisely how the community accommodates plurality.

3. The Community's Settlement for the Individual

In explaining the origins of political philosophy, Leo Strauss writes that, "all political action has then in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or the good society. For the good society is the complete political good. If this directedness becomes explicit, if men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges" (Strauss 1957, vol. 19, p. 343). All political action naturally includes the establishment of the community, the point of which is to enable people to lead good lives and to realize the common good. How then, can the settlement of the very life of each individual within the community be achieved? On the basis of social division, Xunzi proposes a social image of people "living in a community harmoniously and being one" (*qunju heyi* 群居和一). In Xunzi's words:

Accordingly, for their sake the former kings established ritual and *yi* in order to divide the people up and cause there to be the rankings of noble and base, the distinction between old and young, and the divisions between wise and stupid and capable and incapable. All these cause each person to carry out his proper task and each to attain his proper place. After that, they cause the amount and abundance of their salaries to reach the proper balance. This is the way to achieve community life and harmonious unity. ("Rongru") (Hutton 2014, p. 30)

It is vital to emphasize that achieving communal life and harmonious unity requires certain conditions. The social arrangements and distributions made by the former kings were reasonable, and best suited to the development of each individual. In this process, an order would be formed in the society in which a hierarchy would be constructed of nobility and inferiority, as well as a differentiation between the young and the old, which must be adhered to in order for people to enjoy a good life. This paper tries to explore the issue from two perspectives: the *dao* of how to *qun* and *fen* as a requirement of ritual and legislation.

3.1. Jun (君 Lord) as the Creator and Authority

The political philosophy of Xunzi is based on an ethical–humane orientation. The social values and morality are given externally by the community's kings. Xunzi adds:

Now how about the way of the former kings and the ordering influence of *ren* and *yi*, and how these make for communal life, mutual support, mutual adornment, and mutual security? ("Rongru") (Hutton 2014, p. 28)

As previously mentioned, former kings (*xianwang* 先王) appear when mankind is faced with chaos, performing epoch-making tasks since only sage kings (*shengwang* 圣王) can establish rituals and make laws for the community. The legislation set for the community was seen to cover all aspects of public life.

Various names for the community's leaders present fine distinctions in the Xunzi. Firstly, there is the distinction between the former kings and later kings (*houwang* 后王). The former kings are creators who, in response to the chaotic original state of humanity, first uphold the *dao* and practice the rituals that enable everyone to be nourished and to live in peace. The rulers should follow the path of the ancient kings and emulate the later kings. Youlan Feng suggests that by the time of Xunzi, King Wen (*Wenwang* 文王) and Duke Zhou (*Zhougong* 周公) were considered the later king, and the *dao* of Zhou could only be called the *dao* of the later kings. (Feng 2000, p. 245) This classification was made

based on historical sequence. Secondly, Xunzi has different definitions of sages (*sheng* 圣) and kings (*wang* 王). He believes that “utter sufficiency” (*zhizu* 至足) (“Jiebi 解蔽”) means becoming sage kings, as they perfected both morality and governance. A sage is someone who is knowledgeable about all aspects of moral relationships, and hence does not require an appropriate political position. For example, Confucius was a sage but not a king. In contrast, the contributions of a king primarily lie in the establishment of institutions and by their becoming a political leader. Third, Xunzi distinguishes between the Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) and the ruler of a state, with the former being the ruler of *tianxia* and the latter being the ruler of a particular city-state. During Xunzi’s time, the actual existing states, including territories governed by *Zhou tianzi* 周天子 (the emperor of Zhou), were limited to individual city-states. (Sato 2021, p. 253). The word “lord” only referred to the sovereign of a vassal state in the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods.

As stated above, there is a slight difference between the concept of “sage king” and that of “lord”. According to Xunzi, the sage kings are ideal lords as they have mastered and can maintain a balance between ruling by ethics and the system of governance. The process of *qun* (which means forming a community), on the other hand, depends on the governance of the lord. This idea is closely related to Xunzi’s idea of “the *dao* of the lord” (*jundao* 君道). Eric Hutton notes the commonality in the pronunciation of the Chinese words *jun* (君 lord) and *qun* (群 community), which, according to Feng Shi, is not without significance. One of the important definitions Xunzi gives to the lord is “good at forming a community” (*shanqun* 善群):

The true lord is one who is good at forming a community. When the way of forming a community is properly practiced, then the myriad things will each obtain what is appropriate for them, the six domestic animals will each obtain their proper growth, and all the various things will obtain their proper life spans. (“Wangzhi”) (Hutton 2014, p. 76)

Xunzi elevates the practice of *qun* as *jundao*, by which the life of all the creatures could be accommodated, illustrating an associative view of the universe. It is noteworthy that when Xunzi refers to the *dao*, it cannot be regarded as a strictly metaphysical concept, but rather as a form of political wisdom put into practice by the lord. He expounds that the *dao* carried out by the lord ought to contain four dimensions:

What is the way? I say: It is the way of a true lord. Who is a true lord? I say: It is one who is good at keeping people alive and nurturing them, good at organizing and ordering people, good at elevating and employing people, and good at beautifying and ornamenting people. When one is good at keeping people alive and nurturing them, they will love him. When one is good at organizing and ordering people, they will feel comfortable with them. When one is good at elevating and employing people, they will delight in him. When one is good at beautifying and ornamenting people, they will give him glory. When the four key factors are possessed completely, then everyone under heaven will slide with them. This is called being able to create community. (“Jundao 君道”) (Hutton 2014, p. 123)

Xunzi holds that the lord should uphold and insist on four main aspects of the *dao*: Firstly, people’s reasonable desires should be satisfied. Secondly, the lord is responsible for regulating the lives of his people and governing them, including the establishment of basic orders. Thirdly, suitable positions and statuses should be created and allocated. Lastly, rituals and righteousness should be advocated and utilized to educate the people in becoming better moral agents both externally and internally. Furthermore, by upholding these principles, the lord will be beloved by all the people under heaven. The lord, therefore, not only holds the political power to rule the entire land, but also becomes the pivot of ideological principles of the world, acting as the transmitter of political teachings in poetry, books, ritual and music, as well as the embodiment of the *dao*. This is important, as the ideal of “living in harmony” was seen to only be achieved when ritual, justice, and culture constituted part of the governance. As Xunzi says:

But to have a gentleman acting as ruler and disorder in the state—from ancient time to the present I have never heard of a such thing. This is what the old text means when it says, “Order is born from the gentleman, disorder from the pretty man.” (“Wangzhi”) (Hutton 2014, p. 38)

Significantly, Xunzi had extremely high expectations for the lord, even exceeding his expectations for the establishment of the community, as he saw a strong connection between the lord and the governing of the state. To some extent, the meritocratic selection and appointment of lords would eventually lead to political centralization and authoritarianism. Further, Xunzi differentiates individuals in a hierarchical order that places the lord and the people on unequal footings. As the lord represents the will to power, he is highly involved and prominent in the whole political system.

Generally, in Chinese philosophy, the concept of the individual is not prominent, the relationship between the sage and the people is discussed more from the standpoint of the community. Nevertheless, in discussing the formation of ritual, legislation, customs, and social order when establishing the community, Xunzi gives due consideration to how individuals should embrace moral transformation to overcome excessive desires. He proposes that sage kings should play a key role in combining the community’s power with the individual’s rights. Only through the guidance and edification of sage kings can a balance be achieved between the community’s general will and the individual’s personal development. From the above discussions, we can conclude that the relationship between the individual and the community is relatively clear in *Xunzi*. Because of limited resources and the flaws of human nature, individuals cannot survive on their own. The advantage of humans is that they have the rationality and ability to form communities based on the recognition and delineation of different social roles and relationships.

3.2. *Fen*: The Principle for the Organization and Distribution of the Community

The organization of individuals within a highly centralized community requires a foundation in social norms, values and beliefs. Xunzi’s conceptual framework of *fen*, *yi* 义 (righteousness) and *bian* 辨 (differentiation) provides this foundation for the community. When we delve further into this issue, it will be useful to focus on the terms of *fen* as used in the *Xunzi*. In his view, the formation of the community, including the acceptance of common values by human beings, cannot be separated from *fen*. Xunzi makes the following statement:

Why are humans able to form communities? I say it is because of *fen*. How can *fen* be put into practice? I say it is because of *yi*. And so if they use *yi* in order to make social divisions, then they will be harmonized. If they are harmonized, then they will be unified. If they are unified, then they will have more force. If they have more force, then they will be strong. If they are strong, then they will be able to overcome the animals. And so, they can get to live in homes and palaces. (“Wangzhi”) (Hutton 2014, p. 76)

According to Xunzi, the term *fen*, which can be understood as a norm and value, is a human characteristic and an essential element in the formation of the community. Xunzi takes rituals as the basic structure of his political philosophy, within which there is a hierarchy dividing noblemen and the grassroots, a distinction between the old and the young, and separate rules for the rich and the poor. On this basis, Xunzi concludes that ritual has two functions: to nurture (to ensure people’s desires can be met without having too much stress on resources) and to distinguish (as in establishing a social order). Judging from the latter, it can be seen that ritual encompasses impartiality and objectivity in that everyone would have rituals designated for them, albeit being differentiated by class. Xunzi says:

For human ways, none is without distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions, and of social divisions, none are greater than rituals, and of rituals, none are greater than those of sage kings. (“Feixiang 非相”) (Hutton 2014, p. 35)

The system of ritual contains connotations of impartiality and objectivity. It defines different classes of people and allows people to do what they are fit to do, in which their class determines the rules that people are expected to follow in the given ideology. People who are evil in nature are averse to labor and lack awareness of their social rights and duties. The only way to draw a clear line between the public and private spheres is to make rituals to “clarify the division (*mingfen* 明分)” so that people can clearly know their rights and obligations. Only in this way can people avoid social disputes caused by the lack of boundaries to one’s desires, while also clearly understanding their duties and being thus able to effectively fulfill their social obligations. The limitation of human desires is hence important in Xunzi’s treatise of rituals, because “If there is no *duliang* 度量 (measure) or *fenjie* 分界 (limit) to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other” (“*Lilun*”) (Hutton 2014, p. 201). Therefore, Xunzi saw the need for individuals to sacrifice personal satisfaction in order to seek long-term developments of the community. In this way, the individual’s own situation will be also improved under the umbrella of the community. This is what makes sustainable and rational public life possible. Undeniably, Xunzi recognizes the differences in abilities, talents, identity and moral standards of individuals. However, he also asserts that the principle of *fen* in rituals would allow for different people to retain such differences while striving for relative fairness and fulfilling personal satisfaction. The *duliang* and *fenjie* in the *Xunzi* can also be understood as the contents of the rights and duties that people pursue today, which would have their scopes and limits. Xunzi writes:

That what is most great and lofty in the world, is the boundary for right and wrong, and is the source from which arise the allotments of tasks and the naming of phenomena—the regulations of true kings are just that. (“*Zhenglun* 正论”) (Hutton 2014, p. 198)

With regards to *fen*, regulations for true kings can be summarized into two main points. The first would be to educate people to differentiate right from wrong, while the second would include the prescription of different divisions of labor and systems of nomenclature. It is worth noting that there are two pronunciations for the word “*fen*” in Mandarin, corresponding to the two interpretations of the term. This term can be a noun, referring to a fixed position in the political order; while it also appears as a verb, which means to make a distinction. Therefore, different translations of “*fen*” include division, allotment, distinction, distribution, etc. For Xunzi, division can hence be discussed between good or evil, heaven or human, schools of thought, honor or disgrace, and governance or chaos. Further, Xunzi closely links the terms of *fen* with the coordination of the community. He says:

In order for people to live, they cannot be without community. If they form communities but lack social divisions then they will struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos they will be impoverished. Thus, to lack social divisions is the greatest harm to people, and to have social divisions is the root benefit for the whole world. And the lord of men is the pivot and crucial point in controlling social divisions. (“*Fuguo*”) (Hutton 2014, p. 105)

Here Xunzi is playing upon the fact that the word *jun* 君 (lord) and *qun* 群 (form communities) are very similar in both pronunciation and written form during ancient times (a similarity that one can still perceive in their present pronunciations and written forms). Xunzi demonstrates that social division is essential to the creation of a stable community, as it can lead to prosperity and prevent strife. From a utilitarian perspective, the whole community benefits from division. With regards to ethical concerns included in division, Xunzi’s proposal is as follows:

As saying goes: When the farmers are allotted their fields and then plow them, when the merchants are allotted their tasks and then set to work, when the hundred craftsmen are allotted their tasks and then set to work, when the grand min-

isters are allotted their assignments and then hear their cases, when the rulers who preside over states bestowed upon them as feudal lords are allotted their land and then guard it, when the three dukes collect together various proposed methods for governing and debate over them—then the Son of Heaven need merely keep himself in a reverent state and that is all. If both inside and outside the palace things are like this, then everything under heaven will be peaceful and even, and everyone will be well-ordered and live in accordance with the proper distinctions. This is something in which the hundred kings were the same, and such is the great division of society brought about by ritual and proper models. (“Wangba 王霸”) (Hutton 2014, p. 106)

In a further elaboration on the concept of *fen*, Xunzi suggests that it encompasses both “the divisions of social status” in human society, namely the distinguishing between rulers and subjects, as well as “the divisions of labor” (or what may be called the “allotment”) between key trades and industries, including agriculture, industrial production, commerce and scholarship, which are all essential to the development of the traditional Chinese society. He claims that only when “the division” is successfully instituted, can the common good be achieved. This leads to the assertion that a clear division of rights and duties is necessary for the common good to be achieved. By clarifying the rights and duties of each individual, the young and the strong will not compete with each other, and all kinds of trades and industries will be at peace, allowing for harmony within the family.

In this sense, *fen* can be understood as a principle of difference. In terms of difference, people are delegated to different occupations because these divisions would be based on differences in individuals’ abilities, strengths and other personal circumstances. Different roles, identities, ages and genders in society generate varying statuses and occupations in the community, allowing people to function in accordance with their own situation or as appropriate. In terms of universality, people share common emotions, desires, and pursuits, and are subservient to the rule of the saints and are thus able to accept the same values and undergo a moral transformation, so that different people can live harmoniously in a community.

To explain why people are willing to accept this differential social arrangement, Xunzi offers a twofold explanation. On the one hand, no matter how competent an individual is, they would have personal limitations and must hence cooperate with others to share workloads in order to seek a better existence, which is the significance of the formation of the community. The meaning of *fen* first lies in “nurturing the people” (*yangmin* 养民), through the contribution and collaboration of different social classes and fields, such as agriculture, industrial production, commerce, and scholarship, in order to satisfy the basic desires of all people in the world at the same time. As Loubna El. Amine points out, “By dividing society into classes based on distinctions of eminence, age, and merit, rituals cause the people ‘to perform the duties of their station in life and each to receive his due’. This prevents a situation where everyone feels entitled to the same things, or where uncertainty about the future drives people to focus on satisfying immediate needs” (Amine 2015, p. 99). Dividing the individuals within a community into classes allows them to give up some of their immediate interests for long-term enjoyment, ensuring that individuals of every age, rich or poor, are nourished within a stable social structure.

On the other hand, Xunzi analyzes the commonalities and differences among people. Xunzi argues that people fundamentally share common characteristics due to their nature, emotions and desires. However, if the sage treats them equally, they will fight for the same things and intensify social conflicts. In this regard, Xunzi does not agree with Confucius’ statement that “inequality rather than want is the cause of trouble” (*buhuan gua er huan bujun* 不患寡而患不均) (Analects 16.1) but asserts that the bright kings treat people differently yet achieve the ideal of universal harmony.

3.3. A Specific Case: Three-Year Mourning

Further, the meanings of *fen* can be discussed pertaining to specific rites. An excellent example of the idea of division is Xunzi's study of funeral rites. According to Xunzi, the ancient Chinese custom and norm of "three-year mourning" (*sannian zhi sang* 三年之喪) is the best expression of humanitarianism. He sees this regulation as a rite of passage that most fully expressed humanity:

What is the reason for the three-year mourning period? I say: It takes measure of people's dispositions and establishes a proper form for them. It accordingly ornaments the various groups of people, distinguishing different regulations for close and distant relatives and for the noble and the lowly, such that one can neither add to nor subtract from it. Thus I say: it is a method that is to be neither adapted nor changed. ("Lilun") (Hutton 2014, p. 213)

The term "three-year mourning" refers to the 25 months of mourning that children must complete after the death of their parents. The word "accordingly 因 (*yin*)" expresses the need for rituals to be catered to specific emotions, for they can only be used to ornament the various groups of people and distinguish regulations for close and distant relatives if they can appeal to common feelings of the people. In mourning, the relationship between the *Wufu* 五服 (five degrees of mourning clothing) system is very clearly denoted, as dress codes and diets are very strictly organized in rituals, according to human relationships. Confucian scholar Yingda Kong 孔颖达 writes in a commentary that *qun* refers to all the relatives in the *Wufu* system, who would each don different mourning garments (Zheng and Kong 2009, p. 3609). According to Xunzi, the humanist spirit of Confucianism is fully expressed in these regulations. The individual, as an observer of the rites, does not have liberty to express one's own feelings and emotions, especially in the case of mourning. He must abide by norms and customs of the community in a proper manner in accordance with these rules of social relations. These regulations are not rigid but were seen to be the most appropriate expressions for each person according to their status, duties, age, relationships, etc. Moreover, it is because of these differences that society can develop in a better direction, therefore, Xunzi emphasizes the importance of differential provision:

Where ranks are equal, there will not be enough goods to go around; where power is equally distributed, there will be a lack of unity; where there is equality among the masses, it will be impossible to employ them. ("Wangzhi") (Hutton 2014, p. 38)

Xunzi's emphasis on fair social division is also for the sake of unity. It is because of the differences in statuses and ranks that the lord is able to manage each individual within the community, and thus create a stable social order. Since people are aware of the unequal distributions, they would also be more inclined to identify their roles and obligations in order to obtain the social resources to which they are entitled.

It is necessary to emphasize here that the concept of *qun* is inseparable from the concept of *fen*. Xunzi believes that human beings are similar in nature, but that treating them equally could result in competition for the same things, leading to intensified social conflicts. In performing rituals, the sage kings follow the principle of "making each person carry out one's own duties and get what oneself deserves", meaning that the individual's ability and suitability for a certain task would firstly be considered, thus deciding on social arrangements and distributions that are well thought out, reasonable and best suited to each person's own development. Therefore, fairness and legality are also embedded in the concept of *fen*, which is fundamental to the establishment of a community. Hence, the term "*fen*" concurrently has a descriptive and also a normative meaning.

4. For the Common Good

It should be noted that Xunzi also points out that the basis of *fen* is *yi*. This concerns more the understanding Xunzi has of the moral transformation of the individual. The individual in the *Xunzi* is not only a citizen in social and political life, but also a spiritual,

ethical, and moral subject. Xunzi's appeal for moral transformation of each man rests on his understanding that man, as an integral part of the community, will work towards the realization of the common good. Xunzi's definition of good and evil hence includes public, objective, and normative implications. He writes:

In every case, both in ancient times and in the present, what everyone under Heaven calls good is being correct, ordered, peaceful, and controlled. What they call bad is being deviant, dangerous, unruly, and chaotic. This is the division between good and bad. ("Xing'e") (Hutton 2014, p. 155)

According to Xunzi, there has been a common understanding of *shan* from ancient times until his contemporary period: that which is beneficial for constructing an ordered and peaceful community is considered as *shan*. Nevertheless, from the individual's standpoint, is this necessarily *shan*? Why then is the individual motivated to practice *shan*? By discussing this issue from both external and internal perspectives, we can gain a better understanding of Xunzi. From a public perspective, Xunzi explains that, in accordance with societal expectations and needs, individuals are subjects to the seemingly authoritarian government as they must only submit to the will of wise rulers, recognize what is beneficial for the community, and work diligently to achieve the common good. Personally, however, acquiring morality is an inclination of the individual mind. There are different accounts of Xunzi's theory that "human nature is inherently evil", but one explanation also accentuates the goodness of the mind. Xunzi emphasizes that the mind cannot help but acknowledge the *dao*, and that each individual's mind has the capacity and inclination to learn and practice the *dao*. This is also termed as the *wei* 为 (moral transformation) of individuals. There are different interpretations of the term *wei*. John Knoblock renders *wei* as "conscious exertion" and reveals that Xunzi also calls *wei* "acquired nature": What must be learned before a man can do it and what he must apply himself to before he can master it yet is found in man is properly called "acquired nature" (23. IC) (See Knoblock 1994, vol. III, p. 143). Jonathan W. Schofer points out: "Conscious activity as a part of learning includes studying texts, practicing ritual, being conscious of good and bad qualities in oneself and others, following the instructions of a teacher, associating with good and learned people, and concentrating on attaining the qualities exhibited by a Confucian sage" (Schofer 2000, p. 70). Confucianism believes that every individual has the potential to become a sage, a potential to which Xunzi attributes to one's acquired moral efforts and learning. Eric Hutton also writes: "I say that human nature is the original beginning and the raw material, and deliberate effort is what makes it patterned, ordered and exalted" ("Lilun") (Hutton 2014, p. 210). In this sense, human nature is only the raw material, while the moral excellence that a subject can attain through edification from his teachers, influence from external environments, and his own efforts, would be the synthetic product. Nevertheless, consider that the distinction between human beings and animals lies in the fact that human beings can possess righteousness and the ability to judge right from wrong with reason. Therefore, Xunzi's idea of *wei* is not just for the individual, as it also takes into account the survival crises brought about by people's indulgence in their excessive desires. The individual must learn and accept the requirements of rituals sincerely, this will not only improve their moral standards but will also further change the state of public life of the community, directing society towards positive progress. As Kurtis Hagen explains, "Xunzi sees our original nature as problematic, and the rites are part of a solution that evolves through the cumulative efforts of exemplary individuals' intellectual and moral efforts" (Hagen 2007, p. 108). Kwong-loi Shun highlights that, "one's own self-cultivation will have a transformative and nourishing effect on other things, and such effect is itself a measure of one's progress in self-cultivation" (Shun 2004, p. 193). The community cannot be established without the moral efforts and the value recognition of individuals.

Finally, the concept of "community" in *realpolitik* also implies the establishment of certain kinds of social setups. During the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, the concept of "*qun*" (community) corresponded to the idea of "all under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下) and "the state". In Xunzi, there is always an intrinsic connection and consistency between

“the state” and “all under heaven”, where there are even some ideological overlaps. In line with this, Xunzi devised different definitions of state 邦国 (bangguo).⁶ First of all, a state is a living space for people and a defined territorial area. More importantly, the state is an independent political entity that bears significant responsibilities and tasks, hence being a key component in ensuring universal order. Xunzi cites the reign of the Qin state to illustrate what is commendable in terms of political governance as a real community. In contrast to the notion of *qun*, the term *tianxia* refers to a broader geographical area, symbolizing a spiritual community to which its people have developed sense of belonging and loyalty. According to Masayuki Sato, discussions about existing states such as Qin and Zhao would eventually be expanded into talking about the ideal state of the future, where the people, territory, and governmental system exceeds far beyond the scale of the vassal states that existed at that time. The structure of such a state then, is also no longer like that of existing vassal states; the state has the size and structure comparable to the world. In this exposition, Xunzi’s ideal ruler is called the sage king (shengwang 圣王), the later kings (houwang 后王), the teacher of people (renshi 人师), etc. These names are all aliases for the emperor of the world (*tianxiazhiyun* 天下之君) (Sato 2021, p. 254).

Xunzi’s ideal was to foster kinship amongst people from the “four seas”, which was seen to be possible under the rule of the sages who can differentiate and unite all under heaven. This unity of mankind is the ultimate goal of Xunzi’s theory of *qun*, as can be seen from his citing of the state of Qin to demonstrate what was commendable aspects of political governance as a real community. He writes that “The gentleman examines the Way of the later kings and then discusses events prior to the hundred kings as easily as clasping his hands and debate in court. He extends the controlling influence of ritual and *yi*, marks out the divisions between right and wrong, gathers into hand the crucial affairs of the world, and orders the masses within the four seas, all as though employing a single person” (“Bugou 不苟”) (Hutton 2014, p. 21). The establishment of universal values through the sage kings ultimately allows individuals to coalesce into a harmonious community, reflecting ancient Chinese universalism.

As the world today encompasses much diversity, Xunzi’s thoughts provide valuable insights for contemporary society, particularly in addressing the conflicts caused by national, ethnic, cultural, and ideological differences. Since we have to co-habit on the same Earth, it is crucial that we collaborate, communicate, be open-minded, and respect differences to create a more cohesive community for all of mankind. While Confucius believes that “all within the four seas are brothers” (*sihai zhinei jie xiongdi* 四海之内皆兄弟也) (Analects 12.5; See Ni 2017, p. 284), Xunzi also hopes that “the four seas are like one family, and all the genera are obedient to each other” (*sihai zhinei ruo yijia* 四海之内若一家) (“Yibin 议兵”), which is a comparable vision to our current goal of building a global community with a shared future for all humanity. In addition, Xunzi also reminds us to beware of the “evil” caused by unlimited desires, an apt advice as we reflect on the problems of “modernity” such as environmental pollution, energy shortages, frequent wars, financial inequalities, and the degradation of moral values. Therefore, this paper argues that Xunzi’s thinking is not only a good example of modernity, but also a good example of a way of thinking. Xunzi’s ideas remain relevant and significant in present society.

5. Conclusions

It is evident that early Chinese philosophy did not place much emphasis on the concept of the individual, yet the pre-Qin scholars had a strong interest in people’s lives and humanism, therefore beginning explorations on how individuals could achieve better existence by forming a community. This paper focuses on Xunzi’s views of individuals and the community. As a renowned representative of Confucianism, Xunzi describes human society as having emerged from a chaotic state while scattered individuals gradually grouped into communities. In this process, Xunzi first assumed that it would be difficult for humans to overcome their excessive desires inherent in nature, this also implies that humans are reticent to achieve a rational distribution of resources in a situation full of competition

and struggle. Under this context, Xunzi further emphasized the necessities of forming a community and constructing a stable social order to guide people towards a harmonious public life. Secondly, Xunzi highlights the role of the lord or sage in the community. He gives due consideration to how individuals should embrace moral transformation to overcome excessive desires and proposes that sage kings would be the key figure in balancing the powers of the community with the rights of the individual. Thirdly, Xunzi puts forth that the only way to draw a clear line between the public and private spheres is to preserve the principle of *fen* and clarify the distinction between different people, so that everyone can recognize their rights and obligations. Fairness and legality are embodied in the concept of *fen*, which is essential for the formation of the community. Each individual's status and contributions might differ, but they can each get appropriate placements and allotment to maintain social order. Finally, Xunzi's concept of *qun* is proposed under the broad vision of the idea of *tianxia* and "the state". Forming a community in realpolitik requires the establishment of certain social setups, such as the states in the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods but at the same time, a true community cannot be built without the individual's moral efforts and the cultivation of a sense of value, especially when aiming to foster a spiritual sense of belonging amongst its people. From all of the above, it can be seen that Xunzi's thoughts are not only of continued relevance, but they have also been adequately framed with relevant justifications and analyses concerning the common good in the modern world.

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Notes

- ¹ Xu, Fuguan 徐复观 (1903–1982), a famous modern Chinese philosopher, argues that "although Xunzi conceptually defines nature, emotion, and desire, in fact, nature, emotion, and desire are three names for one thing" (Xu 1969, p. 234).
- ² Xunzi says: "In order for people to live, they can not be without community. If they form communities but lack social divisions then they will struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos they will be impoverished" (Hutton 2014, p. 105). Tung Xiufu argues that the community and its constitutive norms provide a superior structure for our desires and our life so that we can enjoy a good life (Tung 2012, p. 463).
- ³ According to Mengzi, human virtuous dispositions are like the sprouts of plants whose growth must be nurtured, according to xunzi, transforming a natural human being into a virtuous person is like steaming and bending a straight piece of wood until it becomes a circular wagon-wheel (Van Norden 2007, p. 46).
- ⁴ Dongfang, Shuo points out: "Xunzi's concept of the person or self is indeed expressed as an embedded self" (Dongfang 2010, p. 127).
- ⁵ Bodde writes: "Ignorance of animal social behavior is evident in Xunzi's insistence that the basic distinction between human beings and animals is the former's ability to create social organizations (*qun*, lit. 'to collect together'). Here again, if Xunzi had been more cognizant of the organizing activities of many of the larger animals as well as of bees and ants, he could have focused his attention on the distinctions that really matter, such as a human being's ability as a two-legged animal to make tools or the human capacity for speech" (Bodde 1991, p. 311).
- ⁶ Xunzi's remarks on "the state" include the following points: 1. The state is the most efficacious instrument in the world, and to be ruler of men is the most efficacious power in the world ("Wangba") (Hutton 2014, p. 99). 2. The state is the greatest implement in the world, and the heaviest responsibility ("Wangba") (Hutton 2014, p. 101). 3. The rivers and waterways are where fish and dragons dwell. The mountains and forests are where well birds and beasts dwell. The state and family are where well-bred men and common people dwell ("Zhishi 致士") (Hutton 2014, p. 142). 4. If we draw a comparison for the state, things come at it as if

pouring forth continuously from a spring, and if even a single thing does not receive a proper response, then this is the starting point of chaos (“Jundao”) (Hutton 2014, p. 130).

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